

Writers on the Range: Tips for a new Westerner

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Hurray, you’ve moved to the rural West from a crowded subdivision or city where the traffic has become an out-of-patience game, and now you want to fit in.

You want to learn how irrigation ditches work, build a hen house, and grow fruit trees, wine grapes and a garden. You also want to take a hike at a moment’s notice, or at least look like you’re ready to do 10 miles.

How do newcomers manage this transition? Western writer Zane Grey never wrote a Code of the West, but it was clear from his novels that subtle rules operated in the 19th century. Key tenets were fair play, respect for the land and hospitality.

Today’s code, were one to be written, would include those values, but there are some modern quirks you might not anticipate.

First, if you meet an old-timer and they’re willing to talk about “the way it used to be” in your town, try to restrain the urge to chime in with stories of your own, as that will shut off the flow. Good stories take time.

As you settle in, agree to buy your youngsters 4-H market lambs for the county fair, but only if they know these animals have a definite destiny: Lambs the kids work hard to muscle up will be slaughtered and sold, and by fair time the lambs are sure to have pet names like Fuzzy or Mopsy. Parting will be painful; prepare for tears.

Weather can change minute by minute, and it's no good complaining about it, as the old saw goes. But everyone is willing to talk about it. "Hot enough for you?" will do as a hello at the post office in the summer. You could also tell about a photo from Wyoming that shows a metal chain standing out horizontally, the caption reading: "Stiff wind yesterday."

And even if it rains for more than a week, get ready to tell someone you meet on the sidewalk: "We need the moisture."

Appreciate that neighbor in the West is a verb, and "out-neighboring" someone is a highly developed skill. It can be thoroughly enjoyable (though sometimes competitive) and always helpful, but you need to keep track of who's on tap to neighbor next.

You may live in a rural area, but if your dog poops in someone's front yard it helps to have a plastic bag handy to pick it up. On a hiking trail, you also need to bag up a dog's leavings and carry it out with you, though sometimes kicking poop into deep grass works. That is not recommended, however.

See if you agree that there's a pecking order of hunters, with bowhunters the elite as they've got to be extra stealthy and up close to kill their prey. They also get to look cool in their camo and face paint. However, they may reek from the skunk juice they slather on. Muzzleloaders also get respect as they're shooting ancient guns for some reason.

Never ask a mushroom hunter where they found their boletes, chanterelles and puffballs. Mushroom patches are sacrosanct. If queried yourself, wave vaguely and maybe say, "Not too far from here."

Anytime there's a football or basketball game in your area, try to show up. Same goes for a county fair or rodeo, where you might see excellent bull riding along with a sport called mutton busting. That's a tradition involving little kids who wear helmets while riding a sheep that shakes them off within a few seconds. Try not to audibly gasp. Most kids bounce.

Though no one likes inhaling smoke from wildfires, realize that the only way to prevent forest fires is to prevent forests. They're built to burn. Get some advice about what "defensible space" means and protect your house.

If you're hardcore and want to dunk in an irrigation ditch, do not swallow the water. And never let your dog join you if a culvert is nearby, which one usually is. Culverts and siphons are dangerous and can be lethal to both of you.

Finally, avoid talking politics with your neighbors as you could guess wrong in thinking they share your opinions. You might find out they have a whole host of peculiar ideas and predilections. Of course, they'll

think you're odd, too.

Betsy Marston is the editor of Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. She lives in Paonia, Colorado.